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AN EXPERIMENT IN TEACHING A COURSE IN ELEMENTARY SOCIOLOGY

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One of the various problems of high-school administration that demands considerable thought is the matter of teaching ethics. One method, which seems to have a possibility of fruitful development, is a course in elementary sociology and social problems. As one of the newer sciences, sociology has thus far been confined almost wholly to universities, colleges, and normal schools. The establishment of sociology in the smaller colleges and the normal schools is a matter of recent years. As far as high-school courses are concerned, only a few schools have attempted to work out such a course, and that within the past two or three years. In an article in the *Educational Review* of March, 1913, Professor Gillete reports only two high schools having successfully established a course in sociology.

The writer has been offering a high-school course in sociology and social problems during the past four years, and was teaching one of the courses reported by Professor Gillete. The results gained by this experiment have seemed to indicate that there is a large possibility of making such a course function satisfactorily, both as a course in sociology, and as a means of teaching ethics to high-school pupils. This course has been tried out in two schools by the writer, and the experiences in the first school were duplicated in the second. The course is offered as an elective half-year course for Juniors and Seniors. Seniors have been given the preference in registration. The course precedes the course in elementary economics. The text that has been used is Ellwood's *Sociology and Modern Social Problems*.

The first time the course was offered, it was frankly an experiment on the part of the superintendent and the writer, who taught the course. The original aim in giving the course was to arouse

an interest on the part of the pupils in existing social problems and their relation to life, and to develop a social attitude in the minds of those taking the course. This was to be accomplished by the presentation of concrete illustrations of social conditions, which were within the comprehension of the pupils, and through a study of some of the underlying principles of development of social progress.

It was found that this aim could best be accomplished by keeping in mind a few facts that soon became obvious, if they were not previously recognized. First, formal scientific sociology has little place in the high-school course. It is abstract, more difficult of comprehension, and fails to arouse the interest that should be gained by such a course. The course has to be organized around concrete situations, as far as possible. The subject-matter must be kept within the range of the boy or girl of high-school age. When this principle is observed in conducting the course, it will be found that every pupil in the class has a considerable fund of information and opinion, which may be drawn on in connecting the course with real life. There will be no difficulty in finding a supply of subject-matter that answers the description.

Secondly, the matter of a text is vital. So far as has been learned, there are few texts in sociology which will serve for this course. Practically all the texts written for elementary sociology deal almost wholly with the principles of the science rather than with concrete illustrations of the problems. The text mentioned above was chosen because it meets the demand of a high-school course better than any that the writer has been able to find. The text for this course must be very readable, written in simple style, deal to a large extent with concrete situations, and avoid the more abstract discussions as far as possible. Professor E. T. Towne of Carleton College has issued an outline of a text that promises to be almost wholly based on concrete illustrations. The outline does not indicate any discussion of the principles of the science except in the summary and conclusion.

While this course has never been given as a required subject and is left wholly elective, there has always been a class of from thirty to forty registered for it. This gives an opportunity to come in touch with a wide variety of adolescent opinion, and to

extend the influence of the course to a considerable distance. A short description of the handling of the class will best illustrate some of the things that may be done in the course.

On meeting the class for the first time it is usually found that very few have any but a vague idea of the subject-matter to be dealt with. Following a custom of the instructor, the first few days of the semester are taken for the purpose of a general introduction. In these first few days, sufficient time is taken to tell the class some of the whys and wherefores of such a course, and to outline rather definitely what it is expected will be covered by the "class discussions." From the beginning, the designation of the recitations as "class discussions" is followed. The reason will be seen later. The instructor tells the class frankly that the aim in presenting the course is to give some information about existing social conditions, i.e., conditions of life among certain kinds and classes of people, to discuss some of the social problems that are confronting the people of this country, and finally to get the members of the class started to thinking along these lines. A list of references is also given to the class, and voluntary reading is urged. Each member of the class is required to read one book dealing with a social problem and make an extended written report on the book read. Collateral reading in addition to this book is required from time to time, either by specific assignments or in connection with some topic which is to be reported on. One period a week is devoted to the report of readings of current social work, gleaned from magazines or books. Each pupil is required to make such a report at least once during the course. The pupils are left free to select an account which has interested them. It is made plain to the pupils at the beginning of the course that preference will be given at almost any time to legitimate questions or information in their possession which they think will bear on the subject under discussion. The aim here is to make them feel that the course will not deal only with things they must read about, but with things they know through observation or experience.

After the first week spent in this rather general discussion and introduction to the course, the outline is followed, as must be true in any well-organized course. The course is organized by topics.

Legitimate questions and opinions are found to be plentiful. A few of the class will be backward in this respect, but they are easily discovered and special effort usually remedies their condition. The normal high-school boy or girl is inquisitive, if not eager for information along any line in which he or she is interested, and the experience has been that little stimulation is needed to evoke interest in a course that deals with the actual conditions which the pupils know about, in part at least.

When questions are asked by pupils in the class, they are usually thrown open for discussion, and the result is that the topic under discussion at that time is covered in such manner that the ordinary methods of recitation quizzing are entirely unnecessary. In the semester just closed, the writer remembers but four days when the "oral quiz recitation" method was used, and in those cases it was for the purpose of summarizing topics which had been covered, but in which the summary had not been sufficiently clear. By means of a suggestion, question, or comment from time to time, the instructor can easily control the trend of the discussion so that the recitation becomes almost automatic. The instructor then becomes a leader in the discussion in the true sense. Of course the control of the class cannot be relinquished at any time, and the instructor must constantly stand as the immediate authority, supplementing the discussion and settling conflicting opinions because of his greater knowledge of the facts. The work, however, motivates itself, and the work of the course is accomplished in a most satisfactory manner. To illustrate, during the past semester, for a period of four weeks, the class was allowed to choose a chairman and conduct the recitation itself. The instructor sat with the class and did not take part in the discussion except when his opinion or knowledge was necessary or appealed to. The discussions followed the outline. During this period, one of the topics covered was that of population. A large amount of reference work in the census reports was necessary. This work was divided up and assigned by a committee of the class, appointed by the chairman. The reference work was done and reported; charts were made to illustrate the reports; and the topic covered in a thorough manner without waste of time. The instructor was consulted from time

to time; but the division and direction of work was accomplished without his assistance. Through the four weeks, the work moved along as rapidly and satisfactorily as if the teacher had been conducting the recitation, rather than sitting in the rear row of the classroom and watching the proceedings. This is merely to illustrate what may be done in the course. Another illustration of voluntary interest was when the New York Child Labor Exhibit was shown at the Public Library. All members of the class visited the exhibit, and asked that the secretary in charge of the exhibit be invited to speak to the class.

One part of the final examination is a paper of nine hundred words minimum, written on a topic of special interest and selected by the pupil from a long list of topics. The written report is the result of reading and observation and is usually a very creditable piece of work. The papers are credited in English courses through a scheme of correlation of the courses.

Now comes the question, What has been accomplished beyond a very interesting course? It is rather hard to measure accomplishment in the increase of social standards here; but one or two concrete illustrations may serve to indicate the attitude of those taking the course. The following incidents have all been the result of voluntary effort on the part of the class. Two of the classes planned to see that a number of poor children of the city, equal to the number of people in the class, had a Christmas. The idea started from a report by one of the pupils on the Goodfellow movement of the *Chicago Tribune*. A committee from the class went to the secretary of the local United Charities organization and secured a list of names, visited the homes, and reported to the class. Then the boys and girls, clubbing together, brought food, clothes, and toys, and packed a basket for each child. On Christmas Eve, another committee delivered the baskets and reported its visits to the class, after vacation. The work was checked by the instructor, sufficiently to verify the reports. Another class became interested in the dirty alleys of the city and reported its investigations. This same class investigated the sanitary conditions of the candy and ice-cream manufactories, and was the cause of considerable discussion through some of the newspapers, and at least one cleaning-up. The

class this year volunteered to help in a vocational survey being made by a committee of the teachers. The interest in this project grew out of the class discussions on poverty, and the effect of poor vocational education and direction. After the class had made its investigations, a week was profitably spent in discussing the subject of vocational training and choice, by pupils in the school. At the close of the semester, the instructor offered to talk during two class periods on any topic in the outline which the class should select. A large majority voted for the liquor problem, because, as two boys said, they wanted to know what "the best attitude on the subject" was. Near the close of the course, one of the boys, who is one of our greatest problems, came and stated that a number of the boys in the class wanted to know if they could have an advanced class for boys only, so that we could discuss some of the problems in which they were interested. Needless to say, that opportunity will not be allowed to be wasted.

The influence and the value of the course do not stop with the interest in the course itself. As principal of the school, I find it gives me a direct contact with these people in a way that cannot be overvalued. Not only do the boys and girls who take the work come to tell me that the course has done much for them in getting them to thinking and "seeing things differently," but a great many come with personal problems because they think I ought to be able to help them. It opens the way to become acquainted with the pupils personally. It gives an opportunity to secure their confidence, as well as to start them to thinking. An illustration of what I mean can be seen in the following. One of the boys in the class had been raised in the worst kind of a home life. His father was a liquor dealer, his mother dead. The boy had known no uplifting influence in the home. This boy came to me for advice as to what to do in life. He was at a turning-point and needed help. He said that the course had made him think, and he wanted to know what I thought he had better do. Another boy who came to talk over his personal problems had experienced all the consequences of a home torn apart by the divorce court. These are but two cases of many. In the experience of the writer, the contact gained in the class has been a most potent force in attempting

to carry out some of the work of personal help and teaching of ethics that is a part of every teacher's and principal's duty. The effect of the course upon those taking it is also noticeable in their attitude and their expressions of opinion in other classes. It is reported constantly by other teachers. It seems that such a course fairly bristles with opportunities.

Unfortunately, the course described above reaches only a little more than half of each year's Senior class. That is due to the very recent appearance of the course in the curriculum, and to the fact that it is elective. This course is not advocated as the best method of teaching ethics, but it does seem that there is a possibility of development along that line. There is little doubt that a course in elementary sociology and social problems can be made to function. After having taken three classes in four years, in this course, there is no hesitation in our minds about continuing and enlarging the work. This experiment in teaching sociology in the high school may be of interest to those who have contemplated organizing such a course for their schools.

The following outline is the one that is being used by us at the present time. It is based partly on the text, and partly on Professor Towne's outline.

OUTLINE OF THE COURSE

(Given to the class at the beginning of the term)

- I. INTRODUCTION—
 - A. Reasons for Studying Sociology
 - 1. Definition of society
 - 2. Relation of the individual to society
 - a) Interdependence and interassociation
 - 3. Progress and social problems
- II. INSTITUTIONS OF SOCIETY
 - A. Family—Home
 - B. Government
 - C. Church
 - D. School
- III. THE FAMILY
 - A. Reasons for; Historical Development
 - B. Importance as Primary Social Organization
 - 1. Functions of

- C. Training of the Individual in the Home
 - 1. Love, altruism
 - 2. Authority, obedience
 - 3. Morality, loyalty, religion
 - 4. Citizenship
 - 5. Education
- D. Importance of Stability in the Home
- E. Divorce and Its Evils
 - 1. Causes
 - 2. Extent
 - 3. Results
 - 4. Proposed Remedies
- IV. GROWTH OF POPULATION
 - A. Old theories
 - 1. Malthus, Dumont, etc.
 - B. Economic Basis of Growth
 - C. Social Basis of Growth
- V. POPULATION IN THE UNITED STATES
 - A. Rate of Increase; Present and Past
 - B. Distribution and Density
 - C. Rural and Urban
 - D. Races and Sexes
 - E. Present Tendencies
- VI. IMMIGRATION
 - A. Causes in General
 - B. Immigration to the United States.
 - 1. Causes
 - 2. Effect on growth of population
 - 3. Economic and industrial effects
 - 4. Social effects
 - 5. Political effects
 - C. Restrictions on Immigration—
 - 1. Present laws
 - 2. Proposed legislation
- VII. THE PROBLEM OF THE CITY
 - A. Causes of growth of large cities
 - 1. Natural resources
 - 2. Transportation
 - 3. Concentration of industry
 - 4. Minor causes
 - B. Moral Conditions in City Life
 - C. Social Life in the Great City
 - D. Political Conditions
 - E. Proposed Remedies

VIII. CHILD LABOR

- A. Extent
- B. History
- C. Causes
- D. Effects
- E. Remedies
 - 1. Through organizations
 - 2. Through legislation
- F. Present Tendencies

IX. POVERTY AND PAUPERISM

- A. Extent
- B. Causes
 - 1. Individual; preventable and non-preventable
 - 2. Social causes
- C. Prevention through Education
- D. Direct Relief and Indirect Relief
 - 1. Through private and charitable organizations
 - 2. By the governmental agencies

X. DEPENDENTS AND DEFECTIVES AND THEIR CARE

- A. Blind
 - 1. Extent
 - 2. Causes
 - 3. Remedies
 - 4. Education
 - 5. Occupations for
- B. Deaf
 - 1. Extent
 - 2. Causes
 - 3. Remedies
 - 4. Education of
 - 5. Occupations
- C. Feeble-minded
 - 1. Extent
 - 2. Causes
 - 3. Prevention
 - 4. Treatment and care of
- D. Insane
 - 1. Extent
 - 2. Forms
 - 3. Causes
 - 4. Prevention
 - 5. Treatment and care of

XI. CRIME AND ITS PUNISHMENT

- A. Definition of Crime
- B. Extent and Cost of, in the United States
- C. Causes
 - 1. Individual, economic, social, etc.
- D. Methods of Treatment
 - 1. Punishment for
 - 2. Repression
 - 3. Reformation
 - 4. Prevention
- E. Reform in Prison Management
 - 1. Treatment of prisoners
 - 2. Parole
 - 3. Probation
 - 4. Privileges
 - 5. Labor systems
 - 6. Indeterminate sentences
 - 7. Vocational training of prisoners
 - 8. Other systems of reform
- F. Juvenile Offenders and Their Care

XII. THE LIQUOR PROBLEM

- A. Present Status of the Traffic and the Industry
- B. Effects of the Traffic
 - 1. On the individual
 - a) health, efficiency, support of home, etc.
 - 2. On society
 - a) crime, insanity, feeble-mindedness, poverty
 - b) Moral standards, pauperism, etc.
- C. Control and Abolition
 - 1. Through legislation
 - 2. By employers
 - 3. By substitutes for the saloon
 - 4. By education of the individual
- D. The Temperance Movement
 - 1. Societies
 - 2. Extent of prohibition
 - 3. Educational movements

XIII. EDUCATION AND SOCIAL PROGRESS

- A. Education for Life and Its Meaning
- B. The Efficient Man and His Relation to Progress
- C. Education and Prevention of Social Problems
 - 1. Poverty, dependent classes, immigration problems, etc.
- D. Education and Progress in the Past
- E. Present Demands of Society upon the Individual

XIV. CONCLUSIONS AND SUMMARY OF COURSE

NOTE.—When this course was given in central Illinois, the topic “The Negro Problem” was included but is omitted now.